



# Social science as apologia

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**Federico Brandmayr** 

*University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK*

## Abstract

The social sciences are predominantly seen by their practitioners as critical endeavours, which should inform criticism of harmful institutions, beliefs and practices. Accordingly, political attacks on the social sciences are often interpreted as revealing an unwillingness to accept criticism and an acquiescence with the status quo. But this dominant view of the political implications of social scientific knowledge misses the fact that people can also be outraged by what they see as its apologetic potential, namely that it provides excuses or justifications for people doing bad things, preventing them from being rightfully blamed and punished. This introduction to the special issue sketches the long history of debates about the exculpatory and justificatory consequences of social science and lays the foundations for a theory of social scientific apologia by examining three main aspects: what social and cognitive processes motivate this type of accusation, how social theorists respond to it and whether different contexts of circulation of ideas affect how these controversies unfold.

## Keywords

blame, controversies, excuse, justification, non-epistemic values, normativity

Most scholars like to think that when people oppose a social scientific idea, they do so for ‘epistemic’ reasons: they believe that a certain bit of knowledge does not correspond to reality, or is meaningless, or has methodological flaws, and so they criticise it. Many disagreements both within and outside academia are presumably based on such reasons. But there are many other, ‘non-epistemic’, reasons why people might oppose social scientific ideas. They might do so because they believe that the idea has been conceived in a way that is unethical, for example, an experiment in which subjects are harmed or a

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## Corresponding author:

Federico Brandmayr, Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Cambridge, 7 West Rd, Cambridge CB3 9DP, UK.

Email: [fb446@cam.ac.uk](mailto:fb446@cam.ac.uk)

plagiarised study. Or because they believe it to be useless and that it is bad to waste financial and intellectual resources on it. They might do so because they believe that it provides confidential information to malevolent actors. Or because it portrays certain things they cherish in a defamatory way, and they believe that this is both inherently bad and effectively harmful.

While this list is incomplete, it probably captures a great deal of the forms of non-epistemic oppositions against social scientific ideas: that they are unethical, fraudulent, useless, intrusive and defamatory. This introduction, along with the papers of the special issue, deals with an additional and often neglected type of opposition, one that I call 'apologetic', namely that social scientific explanations provide excuses or justifications for people doing bad things, preventing them from being rightfully blamed and punished. When social science focuses its gaze on bad stuff, such as racism, dictatorship, terrorism, rape, poverty or addiction, so the argument goes, it risks stripping individuals engaged in these acts of their agency and making them not responsible for what they do, thus giving them an excuse (and by 'excuse', it is meant a bad one). Or, alternatively, explanations and theories end up portraying such conditions as normal, as fulfilling some purposes or functions in the grand scheme of social things, thus giving perpetrators a (bad) justification and harming victims.

Many debates about the alleged exculpatory and justificatory effects of social research follow a similar script. They often occur after disruptive events such as wars, terrorist attacks, political scandals, economic crises, coups, crime spikes and riots. They are initiated either by social scientists themselves or by people occupying prominent positions, such as state officials and pundits. Notable recent examples include former Prime Minister of France Manuel Valls stating shortly after the November 2015 Paris attacks that 'no social, sociological, nor cultural excuse' had to be sought for what had happened, and former London Mayor Boris Johnson declaring during the 2011 London riots that 'it is time that people who are engaged in looting and violence stopped hearing economic and sociological justifications for what they are doing'. When accusations are voiced by prominent figures and start capturing public attention, reactions from representative spokespeople of the social scientific associations usually follow. In 2011, the British Sociological Association countered Johnson's statements by arguing that 'sociologists seek to explain – not explain away – these events' (Brewer & Wollman, 2011). In France, leaders of the main national sociological associations denied any exculpatory effect and argued that the way sociologists explain terrorism is fundamentally similar to how earth scientists explain earthquakes or how oncologists explain cancer (Lebaron et al., 2015).

Many scholars probably agree with these responses and believe that the argument that explanations amount to excuses or justifications is fundamentally flawed on various grounds. But while these reactions might be entirely justified to counter grotesque misrepresentations of social science and protect the financial and symbolic interests of researchers, it is clear that they do not sufficiently clarify all the issues at hand, especially given that critics are often social scientists themselves who develop sophisticated versions of the argument. What we need, therefore, are rigorous, theoretically informed and empirically grounded analyses of controversies about the alleged apologetic potential of social research. The present introduction is a first step in this direction. It is structured in

three sections: the first is a historical sketch aimed at showing that accusations against the apologetic nature of social science have a long and complex history. The second reviews recent debates in which such arguments have played an important role. The third examines three themes that are addressed more extensively by the contributions to the special issue: how we should interpret these accusations, what kind of arguments social scientists devise to counter them and the role they play in extra-academic contexts.

## A history still to be written

It is striking how pervasive the problem of social scientific apologia has been in the long history of social thought and how overlooked it is today. Many early social scientists believed it to be a central epistemological problem that needed a specific solution. Their proposed solutions and the arguments exchanged with their critics provide insight to understand the origin and evolution of several assumptions that still pervade social scientific research today.

Of course, the idea that free will is an illusion and that everything that happens in the world is determined by necessary laws of nature (rather than divine providence) has frequently sparked moral outrage on the grounds that it exonerated wrongdoers. If everything is determined, how can we judge what people do and separate the good from the bad? The whole modern period is replete with debates of this kind, in which philosophers were criticised, when not censored or punished, for defending some form of determinism. In his *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire thus summarised these quarrels:

If one looks closely at it, one sees that the doctrine contrary to that of destiny is absurd; but there are many people destined to reason badly, others not to reason at all, others to persecute those who reason. Some say to you: "Do not believe in fatalism; for then everything appearing inevitable, you will work at nothing, you will wallow in indifference, you will love neither riches, nor honours, nor glory; you will not want to acquire anything, you will believe yourself without merit as without power; no talent will be cultivated, everything will perish through apathy." Be not afraid, gentlemen, we shall ever have passions and prejudices, since it is our destiny to be subjected to prejudices and passions: we shall know that it no more depends on us to have much merit and great talent, than to have a good head of hair and beautiful hands: we shall be convinced that we must not be vain about anything, and yet we shall always have vanity. I necessarily have the passion for writing this, and you have the passion for condemning me; both of us are equally fools, equally the toys of destiny. Your nature is to do harm, mine is to love truth, and to make it public in spite of you. (Voltaire, 1764/1924, pp. 100–101)

Before Voltaire, John Bramhall had reprimanded Thomas Hobbes, claiming that his deterministic conception 'dishonours the nature of man' and makes 'men to be but the tennis-balls of destiny' and warning that his views were 'pernicious both to Piety and Policy, and destructive to all relations of mankind, between Prince and Subject, Father and Child, Master and Servant, Husband and Wife' (as cited in Jackson, 2007, pp. 198, 294). Readers of Baruch Spinoza were concerned that if it were true that there is a 'fatal necessity of all things and actions', then 'the sinews of all laws, of all virtue and religion,

are cut, and all rewards and punishments are useless', to which Spinoza famously replied that 'men can be excusable, and nevertheless lack blessedness and suffer in many ways. A horse is excusable for being a horse and not a man; but he must still be a horse and not a man. Someone who is crazy because of a dog's bite is indeed to be excused; nevertheless, he is rightly suffocated' (as cited in Nadler, 2018, p. 386). David Hume, who scoffed 'the vulgar' for not understanding that 'almost in every part of nature, there is contained a vast variety of springs and principles, which are hid, by reason of their minuteness or remoteness', devoted a long section of his *Treatise* to discuss whether his 'doctrine of necessity' had 'dangerous consequences to religion and morality' (as cited in Millican, 2009, pp. 651, 696).

But the emergence of the social sciences in the 19th century made deterministic claims more powerful and pervasive, thus provoking even stronger reactions. Many of the modern philosophers who defended determinism actually did not believe that the highest spheres of human experience and creativity, whether they were called moral, spiritual or cultural, were subject to laws of nature (Hacking, 1990, p. 154). The 19th century expansion of systematic inquiries and collection of facts about social life made possible not only to think about social laws and determinism in all human affairs, including in areas that had traditionally been spared from this perspective (such as love, art and religion), but also to acquire great precision in determining the regularity of social laws. Although the prediction of social events never acquired the terrifying precision that can be found in dystopian fictions, such as the Precrime system in Philip Dick's short story 'The Minority Report', the statistical regularities of events such as marriages and suicides that were observed and popularised in the early 19th century looked disturbingly orderly.

The Belgian astronomer Adolphe Quetelet, who aimed to build a 'social physics' from these statistical data, was one of the first theorists whose explanations of crime were interpreted as excuses for criminals. His theory that he himself summarised in private correspondence as the view that 'it is society that prepares the crime; the guilty person is only the instrument who executes it' was seen by many as leading to fatalism (as cited in Lottin, 1912, p. 479). Quetelet's favourite arguments to fend off accusations of fatalism were that social determinism does not imply individual determinism and that the social system can be transformed, although slowly and only by 'men gifted with a superior power of genius' (p. 408). Quetelet's theory of social laws travelled across countries and disciplines, prompting extensions of determinism to novel areas of society. The historian Henry Thomas Buckle drew on Quetelet in his influential *History of Civilization in England*, in which the laws of history and society were portrayed as irresistible and always prevailing over government interventions, according to a script later recited by William Graham Sumner (1906) in his characterisation of 'folkways' as superior to 'stateways'.

Although Karl Marx approvingly mentioned Quetelet in some of his writings (including an 1853 *New York Tribune* article arguing against capital punishment), he frequently accused his intellectual opponents of excusing the inexcusable instead of finding himself at the receiving end of such attacks. The dismissal of economic, historical or sociological accounts as 'apologia' for capital is frequent in Marx's writings: in the *Theories of Surplus Value*, for example, Thomas Malthus is described as a 'professional sycophant

of the landed aristocracy, whose rents, sinecures, squandering, heartlessness etc. he justified economically' and is charged with a 'sin against science' because he made an 'apology for the exploiters of labour' (Marx, 1905/1968, pp. 115, 117, 120). (For his part, Friedrich Engels [1845/1892, p. 285] added that Malthus's theory had become 'the pet theory of all genuine English bourgeois, and very naturally, since it is the most specious excuse for them'). But progressive theorists were not spared from such charges. In the preface to the second edition of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Marx lambasted Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's book on the same subject: by representing Louis Napoleon's 1851 coup d'état 'as the result of an antecedent historical development', Proudhon's account had inadvertently become 'a historical apologia for its hero' (Marx, 1869/1934, p. 6).

Crime, however, remains the most frequent aspect of social life whose explanation is seen as undermining the moral fabric of society. The members of the so-called Italian school of criminal anthropology, usually portrayed (not without reasons) as dreadfully punitive in their recommendations, actually faced these objections on a regular basis. Cesare Lombroso, for example, argued that Italian statutory rape laws should be adjusted to local sexual habits and sentencing practices. In the preface to the third edition of his magnum opus, he complained that he was the common target of a 'legend' according to which his studies aimed 'to undermine criminal law, giving liberty to all rascals and undermining the principle of free will' (Lombroso, 1884/2006, p. 165). His response, which is reminiscent of Spinoza's, was that precisely because criminals were not really in control of their actions (especially those who were 'born criminals'), it was perfectly appropriate for public authorities to prevent them from doing harm, including by executing them.

Similar debates took place over functional explanations of crime, such as those advanced by Émile Durkheim in the *Rules of Sociological Method*, according to which the presence of crime in human societies is both inevitable (because individual differences cannot but produce some strains, however trivial) and useful (because by provoking a collective reaction crime boosts social solidarity). Sociologist and magistrate Gabriel Tarde (1895, p. 149) reacted to Durkheim's claim that 'crime is normal' and that it is a 'factor of public health' by writing that it was the scientific expression of the 'disastrous development of the most extreme indulgence practiced by judges and jurors alike'. Similar views were shared by many other influential social scientists of the time: both Vilfredo Pareto and Gustave Le Bon, for example, lamented the rise of 'humanitarianism', which for them included the belief that society is responsible for all individual faults and flaws. Pareto explicitly criticised the court testimonies of medical and psychiatric expert witnesses who, according to him, 'make a business of accusing "Society" of not having been as considerate as it might have been of the poor criminal' (Pareto, 1916/1935, p. 1173). Le Bon, for which philanthropists were worse than the plague and France was governed by 'plebs', wrote that one of the reasons why nations declined was the diffusion of the belief that individual effort is useless and noted bitterly that French 'enlightened strata' had been taken by such fatalism: 'they are resigned to social calamities, like people used to be with epidemics, before a science shielded from pessimism managed to vanquish them' (Le Bon, 1910, p. 363).

Even today, many probably believe that Max Weber ultimately indicated the way to settle these debates once and for all. In his critiques of legal philosophers, historians of art and *Kathedersozialisten*, he argued that explanation and evaluation are two radically distinct logical operations, which typify two different intellectual endeavours: the empirical and the dogmatic. For example, in the first of his 'Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences', published in 1906, he wrote that 'Causal analysis provides absolutely no value judgements; and a value judgement is absolutely not a causal explanation' (Weber, 1906/2012, p. 145). Historians and sociologists should simply attribute to certain actions certain effects, and this operation does not involve praise or blame, justification or indictment, excuse or aggravation. But whether or not one thinks that Weber provided the most compelling arguments on the matter, it is clear that such debates have continued uninterrupted throughout the past century.

## Post-war debates

Among the most thorough critics of supposed social scientific justifications are several authors associated with the Frankfurt school. In *Reason and Revolution*, Herbert Marcuse contrasted the emancipatory potential of Hegel and Marx's negative and dialectical philosophies, which presuppose the reality of human freedom, to the conservative nature of Comte's positive sociology, according to which necessary laws patterned on the natural sciences govern all human reality. The knowledge of such invariable social laws leads to a supposedly 'wise resignation' to the existing social order. For Marcuse, then, Comte's social theory 'arrives at an ideological defense of middle-class society and [...] bears the seeds of a philosophic justification of authoritarianism', so that 'the conceptual interest of the positive sociology is to be apologetic and justificatory' (Marcuse, 1955, p. 341, 342).

In the post-World War II United States, various strands of sociological functionalism have similarly come under attack for justifying the status quo (Gouldner, 1970). This is well exemplified by criticism against what is known as the Davis and Moore (1945) thesis, including their claim that '[s]ocial inequality is [...] an unconsciously evolved device by which societies insure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons' (p. 243). In one response to a critic, Kingsley Davis (1953, p. 394) wrote that

By insinuating that we are 'justifying' such inequality, he falls into the usual error of regarding a causal explanation of something as a justification of it. He himself offers no explanation for the universality of stratified inequality. He argues throughout his critique that stratification does not have to be, instead of trying to understand why it is. Our interest, however, was only in the latter question.

Another important episode that testifies to the significance of this question is the 'culture of poverty' debate, which became particularly intense in the United States during the 1960s, notably through works by anthropologist Oscar Lewis, political scientist Edward C. Banfield and government advisor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. These authors believed that poverty was rooted in certain cultural norms, such as 'amoral familism' and

hypermasculinity. Several of the proponents of the cultural explanation of poverty claimed that sociological theories of poverty based on structural or political factors (such as systemic racism) ended up serving as excuses for people's moral failings and dependency. 'Liberals,' Moynihan stated in a 1967 speech, 'must somehow overcome the curious condescension that takes the form of defending and explaining away anything, however outrageous, which Negroes, individually or collectively, might do' (as cited in Geary, 2015, p. 185). Opponents of cultural explanations of poverty retorted by arguing that such purportedly value-free theories were actually taking side in political struggles by 'blaming the victim' (Ryan, 1971) and ended up excusing the real perpetrators, that is, those who had the power to build a more equal society.

Similar debates took place on the subject of gender and racial pay gaps and other forms of occupational inequality. Some economists and sociologists explained divergences in professional outcomes as resulting from institutionalised discriminatory practices or from the absence of equal opportunity, while others explained them as resulting from individual (often culturally grounded) preferences for certain careers and working conditions. In this case, however, scholars who emphasised cultural factors were accused of exonerating the culprits. In her influential *Men and Women of the Corporation*, for example, Kanter (1977) wrote that 'the individual model inevitably leads to the conclusion that "women are different" and serves to reinforce the present structure of organizations and the one-down position of women within them'. Moreover, she added, it 'leads women to believe that the problem lies in their own psychology, and it gives organizations a set of excuses for the slow pace of change'. These theoretical disagreements were revealed in all their magnitude in the trial *EEOC vs Sears, Roebuck & Co.*, where several scholars, notably historians Rosalind Rosenberg and Kessler Harris, provided contradictory explanations of occupational inequality in a large retail company (Milkman, 1986). Meanwhile, strands of neoclassical economics were criticised for justifying the worst barbarities in the name of market society, especially as the US imposed this model by persuasion and by force to non-aligned developing countries. As a critic of the actions of the 'Chicago Boys' in Pinochet's Chile put it, the Chicago school of economics represents a forceful manifestation of the 'function of economics as an apologia for capitalist society and the market system' (Valdes, 1995, p. 62).

Crime, especially the type most frequently practiced by the urban poor, has remained the topic most frequently raised in discussions about the exculpatory potential of social theory. Ayn Rand, an influential writer who celebrated capitalism and egoism in her novels, inaugurated a new season of right-wing libertarian attacks on social scientists. In a 1971 article, at a time when crime rates were on the rise in the United States, she denounced what she called 'psychologizing', a 'subversion of morality' whereby individuals are excused or condemned 'on the grounds of their psychological problems, real or invented, in the absence of or contrary to factual evidence'. One type of psychologising, called 'cynic,' occurs when professional psychologists 'rush to the defense of any murderer [...], claiming that he could not help it, that the blame rests on society or environment or his parents or poverty or war, etc'. She lamented that the ideas of professional scientists are quickly disseminated in society, as 'these notions are picked up by amateurs, by psychologising commentators who offer them as excuses for the atrocities committed by 'political' activists, bombers, college-campus thugs, etc'. Rand

stated that instead of relying on dubious psychological theories in 'judging's man's ideas and actions', we should turn to philosophy, which allows us to make objective moral judgment and requires that we grant 'a man the respect of assuming that he is conscious of what he says and does' (Rand, 1971).

A few years later, Friedrich August von Hayek made a similar argument. He re-enacted Pareto and Le Bon's hatred for humanitarianism by recasting it as egalitarianism, a moral view that he deemed 'destructive' because by demanding that all members of a community have the same share of desiderata, including the respect of other members, it eliminates 'the one inducement by which free men can be made to observe any moral rules: the differentiating esteem by their fellows'. Egalitarianism, according to Hayek, included the belief that 'it is nobody's fault that he is as he is, but that all is the responsibility of "society"', and was promoted by ideologues who, 'assisted by a scientific psychology', came to 'the support of those who claim a share in the wealth of our society without submitting to the discipline to which it is due' (Hayek, 1979, pp. 170, 172).

Debates about the exculpatory consequences of social scientific theories of crime were particularly intense in the United States during the 1980s, at a time when the country's criminal justice system became more punitive, following years of unexpected increases in recorded crime rates and a general hardening of social divisions between rich and poor (Garland, 2002). Structural and political explanations of crime were increasingly seen as excuses for wrongdoing by scholars, pundits and politicians. In 1983, US President Ronald Reagan chastised the 'social philosophy that saw man as primarily a creature of his material environment' for provoking 'much of our crime problem'. During the 1988 electoral campaign, George H. W. Bush accused his Democratic opponent Michael Dukakis and others of wandering 'far off the clear-cut path of common sense' and of having become lost 'in the thickets of liberal sociology', since 'when it comes to crime and criminals, they always seem to blame society first'. The following year, the then US President stated that to build a safer society, it was first necessary to agree that 'society itself doesn't cause the crime – criminals cause the crime'. The sophisticated version of these charges could be found in an influential book by James Q. Wilson and Richard Herrnstein (1985, p. 519), where the authors claim that 'Much of modern criminology [...] assigns great importance to motives in judging an offender, and so is sympathetic to the insanity defense, to excuses based on human need and social stress, and to applying the doctrine of diminished responsibility to the behavior of juvenile delinquents'.

In the same period, Robert James Bidinotto (1989), a writer heavily influenced by Ayn Rand, coined the concept of 'sociological excuse' and mounted an attack against the 'excuse-making industry' (which 'consists primarily of intellectuals in the social-science establishment') in a series of articles published in the *Freeman*, a magazine of the libertarian Foundation for Economic Education. For Bidinotto, social scientists, together with 'an activist wing of fellow-travelers' (including 'social workers, counsellors, therapists, legal-aid, [and] civil liberties lawyers') 'initiated a quiet revolution in the 1960s and 1970s', which successfully institutionalised their 'cherished dream: not the punishment, but the rehabilitation of criminals'. The result has been a 'crime explosion'. Instead of thinking that 'poverty causes crime', he argued that 'criminality causes



poverty' and advised that the 'philosophical doctrine of determinism', which prevents people from feeling and being responsible for their actions, be rejected.

But there is also a strand of *left-wing* libertarianism that has traditionally rejected sociological explanations as bad excuses. In most cases, however, the explanations that authors in this tradition dismiss are not of crime or poverty, but of individual and collective inability to decide on a course of action, especially when it has significant political and existential consequences. An influential author in this tradition is Jean-Paul Sartre, (1943/1978), according to whom 'the peculiar character of human-reality is that it is without excuse' (p. 555) and human beings are 'condemned to be free' (p. 439), so that when people see themselves as objects at the mercy of external circumstances or when they apply to themselves the perspective of 'psychological determinism' (p. 40), they are in bad faith. This existentialist approach inspired several works in the more philosophically minded quarters of the social sciences, including Roberto Mangabeira Unger's 'anti-necessitarian' social theory, which aims at refuting the 'languages of fatalism' of the two main theoretical approaches in the social sciences, that of a 'fossilised and truncated Marxism' and that of 'applied, positive social science' (Unger, 2001, p. xxii), and purports to 'disrupt the implicit, often involuntary alliance between the apologetics of established order and the explanation of past and present societies' (Unger, 1987, p. 5).

Moreover, while explanations focusing on structural or political factors have attracted heavy criticism from conservative sectors, some explanations of crime have provoked reactions from progressive scholars. This is particularly true of theories drawing on evolutionary psychology and sociobiology to explain practices such as rape and phenomena such as group-based hierarchies. A good example is Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer's (2000) *A Natural History of Rape*, which purports to demonstrate that rape has a genetic origin and is a common feature among animals (including humans) because it increases the reproductive success of males, at least where it can be done with impunity. Although the authors claimed that 'a young man's evolved sexual desires offer him no excuse whatsoever for raping a woman' (p. 179-180), their book was characterised as 'the latest "evolution-made-me-do-it" excuse for criminal behavior' (Roughgarden, 2004), while another critic wrote that 'their stance is insidious because, their protestations to the contrary, their account actually amounts to an incitement to rape' (Martin, 2003, p. 378). Social dominance theory, a model of intra and intergroup power relations advanced by Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto (2001), was similarly criticised by a philosopher:

Sidanius and Pratto are quick to note that their theory is not intended as an apology for oppressive behaviour. But there is little doubt that it can and will be taken that way by those in power. Their theory appears to suggest that dominance of various sorts is inevitable, in particular, that there will be some arbitrary set dominance and that men will dominate women. In the minds of many, including policymakers, inevitability is not far from justifiability (Cudd, 2005, p. 45).

Finally, Nazism and the Holocaust are among the subjects that have generated heated debates about the apologetic effects of social theory and historical knowledge. Three controversies have been particularly relevant: the first is Hannah Arendt's (1963/2006) account of the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, in which she claimed the

former Nazi official and major organizer of the Final Solution was not perverted or sadistic but simply ‘terribly and terrifyingly normal’ (p. 276). Arendt was criticised on several grounds, but many critics claimed that her account amounted to a ‘defense’ of Eichmann (see Maier-Katkin & Stoltzfus, 2013). The second is the German *Historikerstreit* (1986–1988), during which several historians and social theorists debated the way Germany should – and should not – interpret its recent past. One of the early interventions was an article by Jürgen Habermas criticising the ‘apologetic tendencies in German history writing’, represented by Ernst Nolte’s idea that Nazi atrocities not only had been preceded by Bolshevik ones but were in fact a reaction to them. The third influential controversy is linked to the publication in 1996 of Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, the main thesis of which is that the Holocaust is the result of widespread and ‘eliminationist’ anti-Semitic beliefs that were deeply rooted in modern Germany. The book, a commercial success and a critical failure, lambasted the ‘conceptual inadequacies of the conventional explanations’ of the Holocaust, which ‘do not acknowledge, indeed they deny, the humanity of the perpetrators, namely that they were agents, moral beings capable of making moral choices’ (Goldhagen, 1996, p. 392). The curious aspect about the Goldhagen controversy is that many critics claimed that it was *his* explanation that actually ended up excusing the Germans. As one of them put it: ‘Touted as a searing indictment of Germans, Goldhagen’s thesis is, in fact, their perfect alibi. Who can condemn a “crazy” people?’ (Finkelstein, 1998, p. 13).

## **Towards a theory of social scientific apologia**

As can be seen from this historical sketch, social scientists and theorists have been routinely accused of making apologies, alibis, excuses, justifications, rationalisations and exonerations of bad things by explaining or interpreting them away. In what follows, I briefly survey three sets of questions areas that are crucial to understanding these debates and which I use to introduce the contributions to the special issue. The first challenge is to establish whether these allegations make sense and what kind of conceptual tools we can use to interpret them. The second challenge is to understand how these debates can affect how social scientists conduct research, what kind of assumptions they use and what kind of epistemological countermeasures they devise to counter their critics. The third challenge is to look at the involvement of social scientists in extra-academic contexts, from legal courts to social movements, to grasp what role debates about apologia play there and what consequences they can have on social scientists’ professional standing and authority.

### ***Making sense of the accusation***

How, especially in light of Weber’s idea that empirical statements and evaluative statements are logically distinct, could an explanation amount to an apology? In his contribution, Nigel Pleasants (2021) offers some much-needed clarification. While there are many terms used in debates about apologia, two concepts stand out and have a clear philosophical meaning: excuse and justification. The widely shared definition in philosophy and social theory is that excuses are accounts that admit that an action is wrong but

deny that the agent was fully responsible for it (because they acted under coercion, ignorance or inadvertently), while justifications are accounts that admit the full responsibility of the agent but deny that the action is wrong. Drunkenness is a typical excuse, self-defence a typical justification.

Pleasants argues that while claims that social scientific explanations can be reduced to excuses or justifications are often preposterous, it is true that some explanations actually amount to the justification of certain institutions, while others show that perpetrators deserve at least some degree of excuse. Discussing historical explanations of Nazi mass murders committed by rank-and-file policemen, he shows that such explanations do not automatically excuse perpetrators (let alone justify or forgive them) but can provide inputs to better assess their moral responsibility. In the end, social scientific knowledge is one ingredient among others of moral judgment and cannot dictate or bypass it. While Pleasants's contribution is grounded in moral philosophy, he considers social psychology experiments purporting to show a causal link between reading or writing an explanation of wrongdoing and more lenient judgement. He concludes that such studies are fascinating but that the evidence supporting them is limited and does not suggest the existence of a power capable of bypassing ordinary moral judgment. In light of this uncertainty, the very question of deciding what weight should be given to social scientific explanations in assessing the responsibility of perpetrators is a moral, not a scientific, one.

Pleasants' philosophical analysis contrasts nicely with works in attribution theory (Heider, 1958) and in the sociology of accounts (Mills, 1940; Scott & Lyman, 1968), which provide a different perspective to understand the issue at hand. According to this heterogeneous body of theories, ordinary people constantly make folk explanations of their and other people's actions, notably when these actions solicit strong positive or negative reactions. These accounts can be complex and culturally variable, but they generally attribute the actions of an individual (or group) either to the individual themselves or to an external factor. In other words, attributions can be either dispositional (if they refer to features such as the actor's character, ability or effort) or situational (if they refer to any sort of external factor). These attributions have profound implications: people will be seen more positively if their wrong actions are attributed to situational factors and if their good actions are attributed to dispositional factors. Whether consciously or not, people use attributions strategically to boost their social image and hurt the social image of their rivals. Punishment and rewards often depend on how actions (or outcomes) are attributed by influential audiences. This is why attributions are often contested and why people are prone to what social psychologists call the 'fundamental attribution error', that is, the tendency to attribute their successes to themselves and their mistakes to external factors. Nonetheless, sociologists have argued that accounts are not simply self-serving *ex post facto* rationalisations of action but are instead a 'crucial element in the social order' because they reduce conflict and can be used to manage expectations (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 46). Accounts are also social in the sense that they are 'learnt by ordinary cultural transmission, and are drawn from a well-established, collectively available pool' (Cohen, 2001, p. 59). It is in this sense that Barnes (2000) conceives of ordinary explanatory accounts as institutions, notably the institution of responsible action and that of causal connection.

What about social scientific justifications, then? The term ‘justification’ is sometime simply used as a synonym of ‘recommendation’ or ‘approval’. But it seems that often when someone claims that social scientific theories ‘justify’ certain actions or social arrangements, they mean something more specific than this, i.e. that the theory presents certain negative things as normal, as fulfilling some purpose or function or as inevitable. This, as we saw, is the case of criticism against Durkheim’s interpretation of crime, but also against all accounts that purport to show the inevitability of what Pleasants (2008) calls ‘institutional wrongdoing’, that is, arrangements (such as slavery), considered inevitable by most members of dominant groups whereby harm is imposed on subordinate groups. Sometimes subtle efforts at justification are uncovered even in the choice of words one uses to describe an occurrence. For example, calling the events at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 a “coup” or a “protest” sparks controversy because protests, unlike coups, are generally seen as a normal and healthy phenomenon in liberal democracies, so that using “protest” entails a positive value judgment.

Since justification does not involve a shift of causal focus, explanations that are criticised for justifying bad things are often different from explanations that are criticised for excusing bad things: the former are political rather than scientific, functional rather than causal. But, as Felson (1991, p. 20) rightly notes, justifications and excuses have something in common not only in that they are explanations of something perceived as wrong but also in that they both ‘externalise’ responsibility, albeit in different ways: excuses state that an agent’s action was forced by external circumstances, while justifications state that an agent responded in an appropriate way to external circumstances.

Looking at things in this way, it is not odd to think that for some people, the knowledge social scientists make and disseminate is part of these never-ending struggles of attribution. After all, what social scientists do is to explain things, although their explanations generally have a probabilistic nature and deal with general, recurring phenomena: not *this* particular crime committed by *this* particular individual but all reported crimes in a country across several years. Explanations refer to some kind of factor that accounts for why social groups tend to do certain things rather than others and why they do certain things more or less than other groups. And many of these factors are so general (or, as sociologists often say, ‘structural’ or ‘systemic’) that they cannot be easily reduced to the decision of one or several individuals, so that they are seen as externalising the responsibility of the agents. Perhaps, then, social scientists are constantly producing and disseminating situational attributions, thus menacing the institution of responsible action. And when the right conditions are met (Ferraro et al., 2005), their theories can indeed shape attitudes and actions, as shown by a growing body of experimental evidence (e.g. Tilcsik, 2021).

There are at least three caveats to this view, however. The first is that although accounts internalise or externalise responsibility in some way, they do so to the extent that they are cast against a different explanatory account, perhaps one that remains implicit in the background. And there are not just two possible explanatory accounts, one ‘internal’ and one ‘external’, but many degrees to which an account is perceived as external or internal. The causal factor, for example, can be more or less proximate to the agent: what psychologists call ‘external’ or ‘situational’ explanations can refer to distant causes (such as nineteenth-century colonialism) or to proximate (or mediating) causes

(such as a policy just enacted by the ruling government). The more distant the causal factors used in an explanation, the more likely that it will be criticised as a bad excuse that undermines individual agency. This means that the extent to which an account externalises (or internalises) responsibility is relative to what other accounts are available. Cultural explanations of poverty such as those outlined in the so-called Moynihan report, for example, deploy factors that are 'external' relative to purely voluntarist accounts based on individual goodwill but are 'internal' relative to structural explanations of poverty.

The second caveat is that attributions depend on what is being explained: many progressive social theorists, as shown above, have expressed scepticism and even outrage to 'situational' explanations of authoritarian, classist, racist and sexist behaviour. In other words, whether one uses a situational or a dispositional attribution depends on what kind of behaviour from what kind of group is being explained. Political psychologists have found that liberals and conservatives display a similar level of intolerance 'against social groups whose values and beliefs are inconsistent with their own' (Brandt et al., 2014; but see Jost, 2017). They both have their own out-groups, whose negative actions they will tend to attribute more to dispositions than actions of their in-groups. Conservatives will look for situational attributions to explain mistakes made by members of the groups they cherish (such as military personnel and Christian fundamentalists) and progressives will do the same with the groups they support (such as people on welfare and homosexuals).

The third caveat is that all accounts are not created equal. Becker (1967) pointed to a 'hierarchy of credibility', according to which the accounts, explanations and apologies offered by members of powerful groups are given more credence than those of members of lower groups. This occurs in small organisations, for example, a hospital or a prison, where there is an expectation that corrections officers and doctors have better knowledge of what is going on (and therefore are to be trusted more) than inmates and patients, but also in society at large, where the same can be said of the upper vis-à-vis the lower classes. Sociologists, he argued, 'provoke charges of bias by not giving immediate attention and 'equal time' to the apologies and explanations of official authority' (p. 242). He encouraged sociologists to take the side of the subordinates and challenge the hierarchy of credibility. If he is right, and if his plea has been successful, what are now sometime dismissed as 'sociological excuses' might be simply the reasons of subordinate groups.

The lesson of this is that to properly understand debates about the exculpatory consequences of social scientific knowledge, it is necessary to understand what are the 'protected groups' that social scientists either willingly defend from blame or are perceived as defending from blame and what is the 'hierarchy of credibility' existing in a certain society. More generally, we need to understand what moral and political assumptions guide social scientists' research practices and how they differ from assumptions held by other social groups.

### *Assumptions, precautions and counterattacks*

The social sciences, or even particular disciplines like sociology, are not a monolithic bloc moulded on a single set of standards and assumptions, but rather a heterogeneous

complex of different framework which coexist more or less peacefully. Embedded in these frameworks are ontological, epistemological and ethical assumptions that vary significantly historically and across countries and disciplines. Whether readers of social science interpret it as having an apologetic purpose depends a great deal on these assumptions. Think of the familiar distinction between ‘interpretive’ and ‘causal’ (or ‘naturalist’) approaches to explaining social phenomena (Bevir & Blakely, 2018; Frazer, 2020) or the variable extent to which social scientists use the concepts of decision and choice (Abend, 2018).

Following this insight, Jana Bacevic’s (2021) contribution to the special issue analyses the assumptions guiding different contemporary approaches to the study of society. By contrasting Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to Adorno and Horkheimer’s *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, she argues that the former is an interpretation of the Holocaust that emphasises individual action and agency (or lack thereof), while the latter highlights social factors, that is, the process of rationalisation inherent in the Enlightenment. This contrast exemplifies a deep-rooted opposition within social theory, one with profound consequences: while explanations that refer to social factors (such as Adorno and Horkheimer’s) are particularly exposed to attacks dismissing them as bad ‘sociological excuses’, they and they only are the theoretical force that can ground a real critique and transformation of the existing political order and this is especially true in societies dominated by a neoliberal ideology, according to which individuals are the sole bearers of responsibility. Governments and political leaders, instead, rely on a submissive behavioural science aimed at the prediction and control of populations, whose members are seen as irrational actors that need to be ‘nudged’ into adopting appropriate behaviours.

In his contribution to the special issue, Stephen Turner (2020) examines the oft-tacit assumptions about agency, blame and responsibility that guided US sociologists in their explanations of why Black people commit a disproportionate amount of violent crime. Turner’s focus is not on criticisms alleging that sociological explanation unduly excuses criminals. Instead, he observes that many progressive sociologists saw exculpation as a positive implication of their explanations, as Black people suffered severe discrimination from the White majority. However, exculpation has a negative side effect: making the excused look as if they are not fully responsible and accountable members of the moral community, thus diminishing their status as moral agents. Turner shows that US sociologists devised various, more or less successful, precautions to prevent their explanations from undermining the moral autonomy of Black people. He thus gives an additional twist to the dynamic of debates about social scientific apologia: criticism might come not only from people hostile to a certain ‘protected’ group, who think that explanations of the group’s actions amount to bad excuses, but also from people who are sympathetic to the group and who believe that the explanations, while potentially exonerating its members from blame, do more harm than good in the long run.

My own contribution (Brandmayr, 2021) focuses on more conventional criticism of social scientific apologia. It looks at debates that followed terrorist attacks in France during the 2010s, when researchers were repeatedly accused of making up ‘sociological excuses’ for terrorists. They counter-attacked by adopting three different (and logically incompatible) argumentative strategies, which reveal deep tensions within the French

sociological field: some denied the allegations, others reappropriated the derogatory label of excuse, while others still sided with the critics and called for a reformation of sociology. To a certain extent, the debates I analyse in my contribution took place in newspapers, magazines, TV shows and online media. In these extra-academic contexts, social scientists are often confronted with people who do not share their assumptions and who might dismiss their work for political reasons. This poses great challenges for those researchers who wish to act as expert advisors and scientific populariser, as I show in the next section.

### *Beyond the moats of the ivory tower*

Accounts work if they are socially accepted. Social acceptance, however, is an unstable category: it can change in the same way as culture changes because of such factors as political shifts, novel ideologies and technological developments. Accounts might be accepted by some people but not by others, and different institutions might dissent about the validity of a given account. Competing professional groups might try to establish a monopoly over their assessment. How do social scientists attempt to integrate their theoretical and explanatory frameworks in the workings of extra-academic institutions and organisations, and in what cases are their inputs criticised for their exculpatory or justificatory consequences? In a way, debates about social scientific apologia are always about how academic knowledge shapes the world outside academia by providing wrongdoers with “techniques of neutralization” (Sykes & Matza, 1957). But controversies intensify when social scientists are actively involved in worldly affairs. And this is not uncommon: social scientists play a role in various extra-academic contexts, including advisory committees, political parties, courts of law, corporate boardrooms and in channels such as newspapers, TV shows, radio programmes and social networks (Camic et al., 2012; Jenkins & Kroll-Smith, 1996). In some of these settings, the point of their involvement is to provide information that removes or diminishes the responsibility of an incriminated person: in the United States, for example, psychologists and sociologists are regularly summoned as expert witnesses in criminal cases as part of a ‘victimization’ defence strategy (Nolan & Westervelt, 2000).

These contexts are often characterised by adversarial rules, polarisation and sensationalism, where nuances are lost and the appeal to emotions widespread. This influences what kind of explanations social scientists make and how they present them, so that their knowledge can have, or be perceived as having, performative effects of the exculpatory and justificatory sorts. Most researchers, for example, would normally not say that a person or group ‘could not have done otherwise’ when explaining their actions and would use more cautious wording instead. In extra-academic contexts, however, either they are urged to make more peremptory statements or their nuanced statements are transformed into caricatures by their opponents or by the audience.

Hadrien Malier’s (2021) contribution to the special issue addresses the problem of how explanatory accounts travel via various media channels from academia to political organisations and social movements. It looks at how his own sociological reflections on the middle-class overrepresentation in French environmental movements were reported

in the press and on social media and how they were interpreted by some readers as handy excuses working-class people could use for not adopting eco-friendly lifestyles. But Malier found more than simple hostility against sociological knowledge: in his ethnographic study of green activism in poor neighbourhoods, he found that activists regularly integrate insights from social scientific theories to make sense of why things are as they are. However, by focusing on certain consumption practices, these folk explanations often cast the precarious layers of the working class in an unfavourable light and rationalise instead the need for enlightened (middle-class) activists in the education of the poor. These folk sociological explanations do not carry the risk of unduly excusing but rather of unduly demeaning and debasing.

Social scientists face a paradoxical situation: to the extent that they want to have an impact, advise policymakers and appeal to a wide public, they will almost inevitably have to add a normative dimension to their theories and make attributions of responsibility, assign credit and cast blame, thus triggering reactions against what some will interpret as defamation or apologia. They will be accused of being sectarian ideologues and of having betrayed their scientific duty. Still, many would prefer this to a knowledge that has no bearing on how blame and credit are assigned and that is condemned to irrelevance. Perhaps we should accept the political character of ‘interesting’ social theory, in Murray S. Davis’s (1971) sense, and be explicit about the attributions of responsibility that derive from our theories, rather than hiding behind a precarious mask of scientific objectivity.

Many issues emerge when it comes to social scientific apologia, and it is impossible to address them all here. However, the special issue wants to be a step forward in the recognition and understanding of this complex subject.

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### ORCID iD

Federico Brandmayr  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9180-5351>

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## Author biography

**Federico Brandmayr** is a postdoctoral research associate at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Cambridge, where he works on the project 'Expertise Under Pressure'. His research focuses on the cultural authority of science and the political and legal uses of social scientific knowledge.